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ABSTRACT

The writing institute for college writing program directors described in this paper based a student-centered freshman composition course on the central premise that students can only learn to write by writing, since writing is an activity or process. The basic assumptions about the structure of writing classes on which the institute participants agreed are as follows: (1) Writing classes should be based on the principle of saturation writing, two or three papers per week for a term; (2) The audience for the writing should be the students' classmates and the teacher, acting not as judges but as interested readers; and (3) The assignments themselves should reveal a clear, coherent purpose. A detailed description of the course and teaching methods make up the major portion of the paper. Included are specific assignments and techniques such as sharing writing assignment excerpts with the whole class; encouraging students to discuss their own papers as if they hadn't seen them previously; initially ignoring spelling, punctuation, and usage errors; using small critique groups; and requiring students to keep journals of their communication encounters to use as a basis for a self-analysis paper. Experience using this composition approach with average college freshmen is described as positive. Extensive samples of student writing are included. (AEA)

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Dr. Strangelove Attends the Iowa Institute on Writing, or How to Kill the 500 Word Theme and Learn to Love Composition

Lois Barry

Last year the National Endowment for the Humanities gave the University of Iowa $750,000 to offer a Writing Institute for 22 writing directors in 1979 and an additional 22 in 1980. The offer of generous stipends for six months' study and our physical relocation to Iowa in mid-winter--it was 20° below zero the first day we were there--functioned very much like the old farmer's reason for hitting his mule between the eyes with a 2 x 4: it did get our attention.

For six months our work focused on creating the most effective possible freshman composition course, based on careful study and serious discussions of rhetoric and composing theory. For me, as Writing Coordinator at EOSC, this meant structuring a course for students who scored 35 and above on the TSWE.

One of the first things we learned from sharing our experiences and observations was that most teachers of composition have not been trained to teach writing. They tend to be disillusioned, disheartened teachers of literature, trained in the belle-lettristic tradition, who view teaching writing as a distasteful activity. As a result, they often devote their composition classes to analyzing literature under the guise of writing about literature. Or, they spend class periods admiring the stylistic niceties of anthologized essays. These approaches might well be compared to trying to teach students to ski by assembling them in the spectators' gallery at a national skiing competition.

Another approach, probably a sublimation of these belle-lettristic urges, is a masochistic emphasis on "back to the basics," in which both students and teacher suffer through work-book exercises, grammar drills, spelling lists, and precise discussions of punctuation. All of these activities parallel indoor skiing classes where students assemble in the gym, far from the snowy mountains, to do exercises designed to introduce them to the correct approach to rotating their shoulders, kick-turning their skis, and limbering their muscles so that when they really do get to ski--some day--they won't fall down and hurt themselves.

One of the important flaws in this analogy is that many teachers of writing, unlike their ski-instructor counterparts, are as apprehensive about their skills as are their students. In many cases, they hypocritically expect their students to practice an activity that they believe they have not mastered

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themselves. Inevitably this insecurity results in their viewing the composing process as a difficult, even hazardous activity.

Although these teachers may not be confident about how they would perform on the page, they do know what they don't like--and spotting errors in a paper is as easy as noting when the slalom skier misses a gate or the downhill skiier catches an edge and falls on the course. For these teachers, correcting papers is an error hunt--the teacher shows the student how much she knows by meticulously marking every mistake.

Consider a ski school where the instructor, dressed in street clothes, stands at the bottom of the hill recording every fall. When the student reaches the bottom of the hill, he is given a report of all his skiing errors. How long would such a ski school stay open?--and how many enthusiastic and competent skiiers would it produce? Such a ski school would convince students that the primary purpose of skiing is to get from the top of the hill to the bottom, following the least demanding route, in order to commit the fewest possible errors. The eagle-eyed teacher would not be impressed with the flamboyant verve of an individual style, but would penalize the hot dog for attempting a difficult manuever that the more cautious and less imaginative students had learned to avoid. Just so, in writing classes, students learn to produce the safest papers with the fewest errors.

Which leads me then, through the snowy trails of this over-extended metaphor to the central premise of the Iowa Institute on Writing: Writing is an activity, a process; therefore, students can only learn to write by writing.

At the heart of many of our discussions was the classic rhetorical paradigm: ethos (writer), pathos (audience), logos (content). As I hope I have made clear by now, traditionally, writing in most courses has focused entirely on the paper as a finished product, often one containing deplorably little content. The student is almost effaced as a genuinely individual writer; his primary goal is to commit as few errors as possible by saying as little as possible. And James Britton's research has demonstrated that in almost 95% of school writing situations, the audience for student writing is the teacher as evaluator, not an interested adult audience, but a grade-giving judge. Not one of us has ever written a Congressman expecting to have the letter returned with a B+ on the top; not one of us has written a company about an error in billing because we wanted a grade from the credit adjustment department. What has been lacking in most writing classes is a genuine

writing transaction, an occasion that encourages the student to write with an individual voice appropriate to the subject matter and to the specific audience he is addressing.

At the Institute we studied a compelling body of research that concludes that drills and exercises, removed from the writing process, have virtually no positive effect on students' writing. Just as students learn to ski by skiing, sing by singing and paint by painting, they only learn to write by writing..and for the most realistic audience possible.

We agreed on two vital assumptions about the structure of writing classes: 1) Writing classes should be based on the principle of saturation writing, two or three papers per week for a term; 2) the audience for that writing should be the students' classmates and the teacher, not acting as judges but as interested readers.

Building on those two assumptions the third is that the assignments themselves should reveal a clear, coherent purpose. A carefully designed sequence of writing assignments dignifies the writing process for the students as well as clarifying the objectives for the writing course.

Remembering that writing is a process, the teacher considers each paper the student submits as a work in progress, not a finished product to be graded. Each paper also will potentially serve as a part of the textbook for the course.

Underlying the total structure of the course is the philosophical premise that writing is a humanistic activity, that students should realize, in the process of writing their papers, that their language choices inevitably shape their world, that those who use cliches and generalizations live in a generalized, cliche world. Students should come to understand that using language imprecisely hinders not only the reader's understanding, but their own perceptions of the situations that surround them. Contrary to most textbook directions, narrowing a topic may also be an occasion for seeing the world in narrow terms. Ideally, the process of writing should be a personally rewarding activity for the students. At this point, writing shifts from being a requirement to becoming an acquirement.

Operating from these basic assumptions, how can the writing teacher restructure the composition experience for students? The first imperative is to share with your students your basic beliefs about writing--what it is good for, how it can best be taught. That information should be available, in writing, in your course description and the first hand-out for the class.

Then the continuing task of alleviating the students' writing complexes begins. Most students are convinced they cannot write. By that they mean they "do not know grammar, punctuation, spelling or correct usage." Many write this litany in virtually error-free prose. Yet even though they are obsessed with the potential for making mistakes, they have virtually no concern for saying something worth reading when they write. In fact many regard the banal as the ideal. To say nothing without making a mistake is the sine qua non of their writing aspirations.

In the first week of the term I show students how empty their prose can be by giving them a vapid assignment (just like computer programming: garbage in, garbage out), something like: Write an essay on the topic "What Education Means to Me." After students have dutifully churned out two pages of cliches about education, I cull one empty sentence from each paper and type a ditto of the composite theme I have created from their sentences. (I have Bill Coles at the University of Pittsburgh to thank for this idea). The class reads through the paper, politely accepting this string of predictable truisms, and only rarely does a student ask "Isn't there something funny about this paper?" It's important to approach this exercise lightly, almost like an April Fool's joke on the students, with the quick assurance that one of the purposes of the course is to teach them to write with such individual voices that no one ever again could cut and paste their papers to make a collage composition.

In fact, the first two or three weeks of class should be as unthreatening as possible. Not only is that important to reduce students' anxieties, but recognizes the importance of play as presented by Huizinga in Homo Ludens. Early assignments with clear parameters allow students to succeed within the confines of the assignment while they are also learning something valuable about language.

For example, one effective early assignment is to ask students to write a theme 100 words long, not repeating any word (not even a, the, and, or, of). Students groan, act incredulous, then get started and have a wonderful time playing around with language. I ask them to read their papers aloud the next day. They are entertained by and informed about their classmates, just from hearing these 100-word wonders. They also are reminded of how dependent they have become on a few over-worked words.

Soon after I use a similar assignment: to write 100 words using only one-syllable words. Again students insist that this is impossible, but once started they soon discover how many extremely powerful words have only one syllable--and they write meaningfully in response to that assignment. One wrote a moving statement beginning: "I want to teach," others write science-fiction encounters, funny or serious papers. Within this playful framework students learn that good writing does not necessarily depend on pretentious diction--that is to say, big words.

During the second week, I work through Hayakawa's abstraction ladder with the class, then ask students to write the most specific possible version of "I enjoy a good home-cooked meal." After enough papers have been shared so that I am certain that students are keyed to being specific, I assign a paper in which students are asked to write--as specifically as possible--about their likes and dislikes.

This assignment not only reinforces the important difference between abstractions and specifics, but helps the students to recognize the individual differences of their classmates--the audience for their papers. I think you can hear some individual voices speaking in these brief excerpts:

> I dislike seeing prickly little stubs of hair on pale, washed out female legs where the gross nubs are only hidden at the ankles by wool socks and sandals.
>
> I like feeling the strain on every muscle in my arms and hands to give every last ounce of strength and endurance to finishing a 90-foot deathly over-hung finger-size crack.
>
> . . .
>
> I like to see yellow dandelions growing freely in the yard, springing up everywhere as if they were wanted.... I dislike the terrible, nauseating smell, texture and taste of bananas.... I dislike many paintings, especially those of big gaudy flowers and fruit sitting on a table.
>
> . . .
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> I like long, hot bubbly baths, I like wearing blue jeans. I like Paul Masson's Chablis chilled white wine. I like watching and hearing a crackling fireplace. I like candlelit dinners with a polite, sensuous man; I like long stemmed, freshly cut yellow roses. I like open fields covered with daffodils. I like rolling down hills. I like traveling in a dependable car. I like hearty houseplants. I like plenty of spending money.
>
> I hate having to play team sports; I usually sit on the bench wearing shorts. I love wearing baggy overalls, especially with long johns and a flannel shirt. I love frilly lacy dresses and the way I get treated when I wear them.

. . .

I like watching the spiral climb of the red-tailed hawk as it soars on the afternoon thermals. I like being out in the desert, surrounded by sagebrush and seeing no sign of man for miles.

I dislike the drained stuffy feeling of a winter cold. I dislike the smell of cat droppings in a room and not being able to find it. I dislike the reference to women as broads or chicks. I dislike the sharp smell of sauerkraut cooking in an open pan.

. . .

I dislike cooking any kind of meal unless I'm in the mood, having my big toe slammed in a door when the toenail is ingrown, finding a run in my nylons when I'm already late for an appointment, seeing a pair of adorable shoes only to be told they aren't made in my shoe size, stepping on a rusty nail the first day of summer vacation.

We also play a metaphor game in class one day early in the term: I ask the students to make up a list of everyday activities, those we perform with little thought: riding a bicycle, sharpening a pencil, draining spaghetti, tying their shoes. Then a list of important activities: choosing a wife or husband, applying for a job, making out an income tax form, settling an argument. I then ask students to write comparisons for items from the first list with items from the second. After fifteen minutes or more, I ask volunteers to read their comparisons aloud. Following are samples from one class session:

Getting dressed is like choosing a career. Most people try on the outfit and see how it feels from the inside to know if they like it.

Reading a novel is like filling out a tax form--I'm always in suspense until I read the final line.

Getting out of bed is like graduating from college--after such a long time in either, it's frightening to leave.

Settling an argument is like sharpening a pencil. You have to get rid of all the raw edges before you get to the main point. When arguing you usually say all kinds of small tedious things before you actually get down to what is bothering you. With a pencil you have to get rid of all the outer parts before you get to the actual point. When sharpening a pencil the shavings go flying in the air as do the words of an argument.

. . .

Listening to a lecture can sometimes be a long, tedious, tiring job like balancing a check book. But other times it can be an interesting and joyous experience, especially when you find out the bank was wrong and you have more money than you expected.

The assignment after that class is to write a paper finishing the statement: Putting a word in a sentence is like _____. This not

only continues the metaphor game, but directs the students' attention to the importance of choosing words wisely.

From every assignment I choose several excerpts, or one or two complete papers, to type on dittos to share with the class. The students know that these dittos are their text. We discuss the duplicated papers--each writer is anonymous--and the comments generated during the discussion are noted by each student on his own copy of the selections chosen for that day's discussion.

Using this approach, the teacher initially shapes the course through his choice of assignments. The sequence of these assignments should, ideally, be worked out several weeks in advance. The teacher continues to structure the course through the papers chosen for class discussion. I make clear to students that I would not select any paper for discussion that was not worth our time, that did not have possibilities of becoming a good paper.

It is extremely important to set up ground rules for class discussions. As I type up the ditto masters, I correct spelling, punctuation and usage. I proof read for the students, but I do not edit. Students are directed to compare very carefully their initial version of a paper with the dittoed copy distributed to the class. What the class discusses, then, is a mechanically "correct" version of exactly what the student has written. Class discussions focus on four major questions:

1) What do you like about the paper?

2) What would you like to know more about? (My uncle shared all his far-Eastern treasures with me. What were they? Does the writer still have them? Are they valuable?)

3) What is the voice of the writer? (Is it consistent? Is it honest? Is the writer saying one thing but meaning another?)

4) What questions do you have? (Why does the writer say this? Does he mean it? Why does he say x here and y there? Why does he say "he would recreate with his friends"? Does he mean play? Why doesn't he say so?)

Remember that in a class of 20 to 30 students, each knows <u>something</u>. Among them all, they will raise almost every point that you would, and some that you would miss; the writer is learning from every discussion that not only comp teachers are bothered by imprecise language, missing transitions, shifts in tense, ambiguous antecedents--and it isn't even necessary to use that terminology to get the point across.

Incidentally, I also tell students that they are free to discuss their own papers as if they'd never seen them before. They are not being hypocritical when they do that; actually, in many cases, they are genuinely <u>seeing</u> their writing for the first time.

When I write responses to students' papers I follow the same techniques--asking questions rather than correcting, avoiding cryptic symbols and writing genuine remarks typical of an interested reader: I jot down comments like: "I can hardly believe that! Do you mean that? Do you still feel that way? I'd like to know more about that. Why are you telling me this?" The papers, with comments, are returned to the students without a grade. They are, remember, works in progress.

There are a number of ways to vary the classroom discussion sessions. In order to "publish" as much student work as possible, I often type excerps from several papers--a series of opening paragraphs, or particularly interesting passages. I may read the dittoed papers aloud, asking for comments based on the four main questions: What do you like? what would you like to know more about? what is the voice of the writer? what questions do you have? Or, I may ask one student to read the first sentence of a paper and comment on it, the next student the following sentence, etc. This approach encourages the less vocal students to contribute.

Or, students may meet in small groups of four or five to critique a paper, with one acting as secretary recording the group's discussion to report to the class as a whole. One peril of this approach is that some groups may backslide and decide to rewrite a student's paper for him.

One approach students always seem to enjoy is a free-reading period in which each circulates a paper he has chosen. I ask them to number the lines of their papers and to attach one or two blank sheets. As the papers circulate, students write their responses on the sheets attached; the numbered lines make reference to specific passages easy. Students not only are absorbed in each other's papers, but they are extremely interested in the comments written by their classmates.

The third week of the term, I ask students to write me a letter in class about how it's all going--what they think a writing class should do for them, whether they see that happening, what concerns they may have. At least one letter indicates that this approach is not utopian:

> My participation in this writing class is close to nothing, because of two factors. One I don't have enough time to give to this class, and the second is because if I don't get graded on every paper I don't give it everything I think I could give it.

. . .

> I'm the type of person who has to be confronted and told what is expected from me in the quarter, or else I'll just goof off until it's too late. Like from all the papers we turn in, I have to pick five papers that are the best that I can write. Revise and rewrite them and turn them in for my final grade. But subconsciously I'll tell myself I can write them towards the end of the class. Who knows, maybe I can, but not likely. That's why a grade for every paper means something to me. I guess that makes me a materialist person, but that's the way I am.

But, for the most part, students make perceptive comments about their writing:

> At first I had some reservations about using students' papers as our "text" instead of an actual book, but soon found that I like this method better than a traditional one. It's nice to be in a class that is generally supportive of each paper and whatever criticism given is constructive.
>
> . . .
>
> I've found that I like very much the anonymity of our papers. I don't feel like I'm being judged as a person, but as a writer, and have discovered that it's easier to write in this type of atmosphere. I know there are many papers I've handed in which would not have contained my real feelings if I didn't know that they would be anonymous should they be dittoed off. Needless to say, I didn't like the idea of reading our own papers to the class for that one-syllable assignment, but will admit that the experience wasn't near as bad as I feared. That doesn't mean I want to go through it again though!!
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> . . .
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> I started this class writing about things I really knew to be true. But I wrote assignments three and four as if I was going to solve all the world's problems. I used all kinds of generalizations that did not pertain to myself. Such as "the dictionary definition of success is...." As we got into assignments five and six, I had some good thoughts, but as they were discussed I could see some weaknesses. For example, I wrote "sometimes it isn't always clear to the class what I mean." I could not believe I did this! When I was trying to persuade the class, I shot myself down. In assignments seven and nine I used too many worn out ideas and cliches. I think you could safely say these were good old cardboard papers. There is a bright light, however, in assignment eight I really outdid myself. This was probably the best one I have written all term, because I was specific about the subject. I need to be aware that my readers require examples and illustrations to understand my thoughts.
>
> . . .
>
> My strengths as a writer are few and far between. Many times I have excellent ideas for a paper, and witty thoughts. But they are sort of like fog, I can see it, and I know what it is, but I can't trap it and make it do what I want it to do. It's elusive.

During one three-week period I ask students to keep a journal of their communication encounters, both verbal and non-verbal, then ask them to write a paper based on their journals, analyzing themselves as communicators. Some of their insights are impressive:

> People seem to feel easier talking in small groups. One-to-one conversations seem too intimate, demanding. Large discussion groups place a greater demand for performance on the speaker--too many people likely to disagree with you.
>
> . . .
>
> When I look over my journal it becomes pretty clear to me that I find myself more successful in expressing emotions than opinions. It's easier for me to say I feel...than I think.... Perhaps this is true because no one can question the validity of my emotions--if I feel a certain way, I feel it and I don't necessarily have to back up what I say with tangible facts. When stating opinions however, I don't feel so secure. I feel that I need to be able to state clearly what my opinion is so as to not create misunderstandings, and to be able to back up or give reasons for my opinions.
>
> . . .
>
> No, I'm not satisfied with myself as a communicator. Over and over this "theme" repeated itself in my journal. Statements like "I feel like every time I try to say something my tongue gets too big." "Why do I judge what I say and how I say it so critically?" "I wish I could speak freely without thinking about it," and "I know I have something to say but it gets stuck somewhere before it comes out" are repeated many times in my log. But, this is not to say that I don't have hope for myself. Another repeated theme running through the journal was the pride I feel for myself in trying to overcome these barriers. I don't and won't simply sit back and feel sorry for myself. I'm taking various classes and doing some reading which is becoming a real help.

As the term progresses, the assignments become more demanding, often circling back to ask students to consider what they have written in previous papers in order to analyze a given topic. As one student said, about the sixth week of the term: "These assignments are taking us somewhere, aren't they?"

From mid-term on, I ditto papers exactly as they are submitted, and extend the discussion to "if the writer chooses to revise this paper, what suggestions would you make for improvement?" At this point a quick lesson on dangling modifiers or the use of the colon to introduce a series interests the students because they have encountered the problem in a student paper and they <u>want</u> to know for purposes of revising their own papers. By delaying this "monitoring for correctness," to use Ross Winterowd's term, until after students are engaged in writing meaningful papers, revision and editing techniques become important to them. Their questions about punctuation, stylistic matters and levels of diction are real requests for information. We may spend some time

in class on sentence combining, using sentence kernels from a student p er that lacks subordination, or work on eliminating prepositional phrases and empty diction, rewriting wordy passages in the fewest possible words. Organizational problems seem to disappear when students realize an alert audience is trying to understand them.

The one theoretical aspect of the Iowa plan that I have modified is the inclusion of a "larger question" which requires students to specifically examine rhetorical changes for different audiences. For example, one such assignment might be to write a definition of democracy for a ten-year old boy, then to write another definition of democracy with a college-age foreign student as audience, then to write an analysis of the necessary shifts in diction, rhetorical stance, etc. I found that freshmen could tailor their writing to the suggested audiences, but had great difficulty articulating what they had done. Because students found this assignment frustrating, I decided it would be more appropriate for advanced levels of composition. In freshman comp, I am happy to have students communicating effectively, without requiring them to write about what rhetorical choices they are making and why.

One unexpected benefit of the careful analysis of students' papers in class is that students become much more perceptive readers. They tell me that they read their textbooks and even newspapers and magazine articles much more carefully than they did before.

My experiences in using this composition approach with classes of average freshmen have been extremely positive. Students do make the transfer from discussions of duplicated papers to aspects of revising their own. They do write with individual voices; the cardboard-theme syndrome disappears early in the term, and students show that they do care about <u>what</u> they are writing as well as <u>how</u> they are writing.

Their final revisions are a pleasure to read. Many are dramatically different from their initial papers and the changes are all their own--I do not have to endure the tedium of reading my own revisions. No, I don't worry about students having someone else do their revisions for them. I think that problem arises primarily when students are frustrated by being expected to produce 500 word themes without being taught how to go about it. Students also know that the final in-class two hour essay will validate their writing progress. From the careful organization of most writing folders, I can see that students are proud of their work; they are impressed with their own

writing progress and they have learned to like writing. And I, as you can see, have become a missionary doctor, strangely in love with teaching composition. Not only does it provide a good indoor job in the winter; it is intriguing, entertaining, dignifying, professionally challenging, and often heart warming.

I regret that I cannot offer you either money or relocation to the plains of Iowa, but if you would not choose a similar list of adjectives to describe your attitudes toward teaching composition, I suggest you investigate the materials listed on "The Briefest Possible Humanistic Reading List for Structuring a Student-centered Writing Course."

The Briefest Possible Humanistic Reading List for Structuring a Student-centered Writing Course

William E. Coles, Teaching Composing. Hayden Book Co., 1974.

Elizabeth and Greg Cowan, Writing. John A. Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1980.

Kenneth Dowst, "What the Composition Composes: The Writing Assignment as Teaching Device and Work of Art." Arizona English Bulletin, February 1978, pp. 99-103.

Janet Emig, "The Composing Process: Review of the Literature," pp. 49-70 and Wayne Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," pp. 70-79 in Ross Winterowd's Con-Temporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, Harcourt Brace, 1975.

William Irmscher, Teaching Expository Writing, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.

Richard A. Lanham, Revising Prose. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979.

John Trimble, Writing With Style. Prentice Hall, 1975

John Warnock, "New Rhetoric and the Grammar of Pedagogy," Freshman English News, Fall 1977.

Basic assumptions for structuring a student-centered composition course:

1. Most of the research in the composing process and composition pedagogy has been published within the past ten years.

2. Most writing teachers have not been trained to teach writing.

3. Most composition courses focus on textbooks which may direct students to write, but do not teach them to write.

4. The only way for a student to learn to write is by writing, preferably two or three papers per week.

5. Writing is an activity, a process, not a product.

6. The most realistic possible audience should be created for students' writing. Awareness of audience should be a component of the writer/audience/content triad.

7. A sequence of assignments should be carefully constructed based on a coherent philosophy of composition.

8. This sequence of assignments should have a cumulative effect: each assignment should prepare students for the subsequent assignment.

9. The students' papers, written in response to these assignments, provide the textbook for the course.

10. Writing classes should focus on constructive discussions of duplicated papers, or on pre-writing activities directly appropriate to the next writing assignment.

11. Writing is a humanistic activity; assignments should lead students to understand that their language choices shape their perceptions of the world.

12. Students' papers should be discussed as works in progress; they should not be graded.

13. Monitoring for mechanical correctness should be delayed until after mid-term, until students have learned that what they have to say is as important as how correctly they say it.

14. Allowing students to choose which papers they will review to submit for a final grade allows the students to make significant decisions about their writing, thus dignifying the writing process for them.